

Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology, and the Origins of European Dance* (New York: Norton 2013), 448 pp., \$35 cloth.

Elizabeth Wayland Barber is a folkdancer, archaeologist and linguist. In *The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology, and the Origins of European Dance* she analyses deeply how the belief in mystical female spirits has developed not only into ritual dances for fertility and healing but also in a variety of customs and traditions of villagers and peasants. Some traditions have survived to the present day in Europe as symbols, superstitions, and even in calendar customs such as New Year, Easter, Mid-Summer and Christmas. The book is divided in four main parts with twenty three chapters altogether, in addition to introduction, epilogue, maps and drawings. Moreover, the volume includes an appendix, notes, bibliography, illustration and credit list and index. *The Dancing Goddesses* is the result of a deep research based on fieldwork, archaeology, anthropology, and linguistics and is of interest to any person pursuing deep knowledge regarding not only the origins of European dance but also on ritual, folklore, and archaeology. Despite of being rather complex, the book is very comprehensible and contains both clarifying notes and amusing anecdotes from the author's own experiences.

In part one, "Dancing the Year: The Ritual Cycle of Fertility," Barber presents detailed descriptions of selected rituals performed in Eastern Europe and Russia directed to female spirits (swan maidens, mermaids, willies, rusalki, and tree spirits) and performed by women, commonly for fertility and healing. She also devotes an entire chapter to explain different types of calendars used by farmers according to their region of settlement and culture, in order to exemplify their need to mark time for crop and harvest purposes. According to Barber, nonliterate farmers developed agricultural calendars because of the need to know when to plant the crops, when to harvest, etc. As a consequence of marking time seasonal rituals originated – one of the main aspects of culture and in which frequently involved dancing. Moreover, she advocates that two highly celebrated festivals were Midsummer and Spring. On the former villagers executed bonfire jumping for spiritual purification and bodily health and as magic to make the crops grow. It was believed that the

higher the person jumped, the higher would the crops grow. Barber also reports the importance of birches for spring rituals: as birches were considered signs of spring, Russian village girls of marriageable age—thus, of unused fertility—performed follow-the-leader dances around birches singing songs. It was magic through analogy, due to the belief that “as the girls dance, so may the goddesses; and as the goddesses create life by dancing, so may the girls.” (39). Moreover, she also presents dance rituals from the Balkan Peninsula and performed (preferably) by orphans to end drought. Finally, she talks about the fertility rituals of Semik (fortieth day after Easter) and Rusalina Week (around fifty days after Easter)—and the dance brotherhoods of Rusalina. During Rusalina Week “spirits walked abroad in daylight...and, though the society was heavily patriarchal, women ruled, while men—most men—did what they were told...To honor, address, and placate the spirits, dancing was ritually employed.” (69). Part one is the foundation of the further sections of the book.

The second part of the book—“Bride-Dancing for Fertility: The Frog Princess”—offers a thorough analysis of the Russian tale “The Frog Princess” and also an exploration of similar tales along with other tales containing similar aspects. The ‘Frog Princess’ is another variety of ‘Dancing Goddess,’ similar to the willies in many aspects, but a damsel instead of a deathly supernatural creature. According to Barber’s examination there are several cultural aspects depicted in the tale. For instance, the bride testing and the trial by dance: as the Princess was tested in the tale, so were the girls in reality to prove their worth. In most part of Eastern and Central Europe a woman is referred to as bride from the moment she is engaged until the birth of her first baby—if she dies during that period she becomes a willy. In order to accomplish a good marriage, brides should be skilful in embroidery, spinning, weaving, baking and dancing. The latter was used to test physically whether the girl was strong and agile enough to bear all the hard work of a wife. There are several examples and details in the book of dances performed for this purpose that still exist in present day.

“Dancing Back through Time” is the third part of the book and explores historical connections and context of the ‘Dancing Goddesses’ chronologically. Starting from the Medieval Era and moving backwards until the Neolithic Period (considering the Romans, Greeks and the Bronze Age), the author shows that several aspects of current agrarian rituals are actually two to three millennia old. Barber argues that there are two main sources of evidence of beliefs and

customs: material culture and linguistic remains. The former is comprised by archaeological artefacts while the latter consists of inscription, oral literatures, manuscripts and etymologies. Barber further claims that for the medieval Christian priests fertility was not to be celebrated, and thus the Dancing Goddesses were enemies of the “one true god.” Numerous accounts from this period come from priests’ and missionaries’ writings as well as from funerary monuments. In this part of the book Barber also presents and analyses rituals from diverse cultures to diverse deities that carry structural similarities: in Italy, Croatia, Switzerland, France, and Germany village women and certain men would fall into trances and perform dance feasts to the Good Lady (the Good Goddess, associated with Diana/Artemis, who in turn has relationship with the willies) in order to be blessed with abundant crops and healing—a practice similar to the Serbian Duboka; the Celtic Goddess/Saint Brigit’s rituals are alike to many Balkans’; Semele (Earth), Dionysus’ mother, was divine and called up every spring by women who danced to awaken the earth and renew growth, as did the Lazarki in Bulgaria. The author also reveals that depicted in archaeological finds—frescoes and sculptures, for instance—not only Minoan women performed dance but this Cretan civilization from about 3200 and 1200 BC also worshipped maiden spirits. So did agrarian cultures from the Neolithic period. For these peoples, dance was one of the methods to create bond and live among themselves embracing members and excluding outsiders.

On the final and shortest part—“Gotta Dance!”—Barber writes about what dance has to say by itself and what science has learned about dance. She also mentions firewalking and trance-dancing. Barber relates that according to research, it seems that humans have the only brain with ability to keep time, so it can be believed that dance begun in the Palaeolithic time. Furthermore, before writing cultures kept their histories into songs because the rhythm, melody and rhymes helped them in memorising. The same might have happened with mimetic dance.

She ends the book with an epilogue where she presents two similar stories about angry fertility goddesses from Greece and Japan made laugh by obscene dances. Both myths illustrate dance restoring life. She concludes that in agrarian societies the main role of women was to become accomplished mothers, maintaining the chain of life. Fulfilling that, they could die and proceed to the Underworld. Failing that, they were thought to have broken the chain and had got

lost in the transition between girl and woman, and as such joined the Restless Dead.

Elizabeth Barber's *The Dancing Goddesses: Folklore, Archaeology, and the Origins of European Dance* is not only filled with valuable and surprising information but it is also a very entertaining book to read. It is of interest to any person pursuing deep knowledge regarding the origins of European dance, whether dance scholar or not. Moreover, *The Dancing Goddesses* is a must-read for any scholar interested in dance, ritual, folklore, and archaeology.

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